

# DISCOVER AMERICA

## Teacher Guide



# Striking Gold: The Impact and Legacy of the American Gold Rush

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## Key Themes

- Dreams of Prosperity
- Persistence and Perseverance
- The Journey West
- Economic Boom and Bust
- Global Impact

## Core Values

- Community
- Life
- Liberty



## Learning Objectives

### Students will be able to

- Recognize gold and understand why it was so valuable to people during the Gold Rush.
- Identify who the "49ers" were and why they traveled so far to reach California.
- Explain what life was like for miners during the Gold Rush, including the tools they used and the challenges they faced.
- Identify how the Gold Rush changed California, such as the rapid growth of towns.
- Discuss basic economic principles by learning how the demand for resources like gold influenced people's decisions to move and set up businesses.

# Key Terms

- 0 1 **49ers:** the nickname for those who flocked to northern California in 1849 hoping to take advantage of the Gold Rush.
- 0 2 **gold miner:** someone who digs or sifts through dirt to find gold, a shiny and valuable metal.
- 0 3 **Gold Rush:** a time period when many people moved to California between 1848 and 1855, seeking their fortunes by searching for gold.
- 0 4 **merchant:** someone who buys goods and sells them for a profit.
- 0 5 **sawmill:** a place where big logs are cut into boards and planks for building things.
- 0 6 **waterwheel:** a type of device that takes advantage of flowing or falling water to generate power by using a set of paddles mounted around a wheel.



# Introduction

## **TELL** Students

Today, we are going to go on a big, exciting journey. But guess what? We are not taking a car, a bus, or even an airplane. We are going to use our imaginations!

## **ASK** Students

Are you ready?

## **TELL** Students

A long time ago, people heard that there was something very special hiding in the rivers of California.

## **ASK** Students

Do you know what it was?

## **TELL** Students

That is right! It was gold! Gold is shiny and valuable, and people thought if they found it, they could buy a lot of nice things. So, they packed up and went on a long trip to California to try to find it. But finding gold wasn't easy. They had to dig, sift through sand, and sometimes even get a little bit dirty. Does that sound like fun to you? Now, let's pretend we are gold miners! A **gold miner** is someone who digs or sifts through dirt to find gold, a shiny and valuable metal. We are going to go on our own little Gold Rush adventure right here in our classroom. The **Gold Rush** was a time period when many people moved to California between 1848 and 1855, seeking their fortunes by searching for gold. But first, we need to get ready. First, we need to pack our bags. Everyone, pretend to put on your backpack.

## **ASK** Students

What should we bring?

## **TELL** Students

Maybe we should pack a shovel, a pan, and some food. Let's pretend to pack them all in our backpacks! [Mimic packing and have the students do the same.]

# Introduction

## **TELL** Students (continued)

Now, let's pretend to walk to California. It is a long way! Let's march, march, march! [Lead the students in a short walk around the classroom.] We made it to California! Now it's time to find some gold. Let's pick up our pans and start looking in the river. Can you pretend to scoop up some sand and shake your pan? [Show students how to mimic panning for gold by scooping and shaking an imaginary pan.] Look! I see something shiny!

## **ASK** Students

Did you find some gold?

## **TELL** Students

Hold up your gold for everyone to see! [Encourage the students to pretend they found gold and show it to their classmates.] Wow! We found so much gold! But remember, even though finding gold was exciting, it was also a lot of hard work. People who joined the Gold Rush had to be very strong and brave, just like all of you today. Now, let's sit in a circle and talk about what we found.

## **ASK** Students

Was it fun to pretend to look for gold? What do you think people did with the gold they found? [Allow a brief discussion and encourage the students to share their thoughts.]

## **TELL** Students

Great job, everyone! You are now official gold miners like John Sutter! **[Reference John Sutter Image]** In 1834, a man named John Sutter left Switzerland and moved to the United States. He had big dreams! By 1839, he found his way to California and decided to become a Mexican citizen to get a large piece of land. He had a vision of turning this land into a new settlement he wanted to call Nueva Helvetia, which means "New Switzerland."

## **ASK** Students

Why do you think John Sutter named his new settlement "Nueva Helvetia," which means "New Switzerland"? What does this tell us about how he felt about his new land and his homeland?

# Introduction

## TELL Students

John Sutter named his new settlement "Nueva Helvetia," or "New Switzerland," because he wanted to bring a piece of his homeland, Switzerland, to his new life in California. It also suggests that he saw his new land as a place of opportunity, where he could start fresh and build a prosperous future. To help build his dream, Sutter hired a carpenter named James Marshall to construct a sawmill in Coloma, along the south fork of the American River. **[Reference Sawmill Image]** A **sawmill** is a place where big logs are cut into boards and planks for building things. They finished building the sawmill in January 1848, but they needed more water power to run it, so they started to deepen the stream.

## ASK Students

Why do you think John Sutter and James Marshall needed to deepen the stream to run the sawmill, and what might have happened if they didn't make the stream deeper?

## TELL Students

John Sutter and James Marshall needed to deepen the stream to run the sawmill because a deeper stream could provide more water flow. **[Reference Water Flow of Waterwheel Image]** This increased flow was necessary to generate sufficient water power to operate the sawmill's machinery effectively. Sawmills require a lot of power to cut through large logs, and in the 1840s, this power typically came from waterwheels. A **waterwheel** is a type of device that takes advantage of flowing or falling water to generate power by using a set of paddles mounted around a wheel. It needs a strong, steady flow of water to turn efficiently and consistently. On January 24, while checking on things, Marshall saw something shiny in the river. It sparkled in the sunlight and caught his eye — little did he know, this discovery was about to start a huge event in history! Let's watch another episode of Star Spangled Adventures to learn more!

## WATCH

Star Spangled Adventures Cartoon Ep. 33: The Gold Rush



# Lesson

## **TELL** Students

One day, James Marshall found shiny gold while building a sawmill for John Sutter. The men tried to keep this a secret because they knew it was a very big discovery that could make them a lot of money. But soon, people started talking about the gold, and the news spread everywhere!

## **ASK** Students

Why do you think James Marshall and John Sutter initially wanted to keep the discovery of gold a secret?

## **TELL** Students

James Marshall and John Sutter wanted to keep the discovery of gold a secret because they knew it was a very big find that could make them a lot of money. If the news about the gold spread, they feared that many people would rush to the area to look for gold. This could cause chaos, make it hard for them to control the land, and potentially prevent them from collecting as much gold for themselves. By keeping it secret, they hoped to have more time to gather as much gold as possible before others came looking for it. The first people to hear about the gold were in San Francisco. At first, not many believed the news until a man named Sam Brannan showed everyone real gold from the mill. **[Reference Sam Brannan Image]** That summer, almost everyone in San Francisco, and soon after, a lot of people in California, left their homes and jobs to find gold. Even the local newspaper stopped printing because everyone went to look for gold!

## **ASK** Students

What do you think would have happened if Sam Brannan had not shown the gold to the people in San Francisco? How might that have changed the way news of the gold spread?

## **TELL** Students

If Sam Brannan had not shown the gold to the people in San Francisco, it is likely that many people would have continued to doubt the truth of the gold discovery. Without the visual proof that Brannan provided, the excitement and urgency that drove thousands to abandon their jobs and homes to search for gold might not have happened as quickly. **[Reference Gold Rush Image]**

# Lesson

## **TELL** Students (continued)

This would have given Marshall and Sutter more time to collect gold quietly, but eventually, the news would likely have spread, perhaps through other channels or after more people discovered gold. Back in those days, there weren't any phones or computers, so news traveled very slowly. People from nearby places like Oregon and Mexico, and even as far as China and Peru, eventually heard about the gold and came to California to see if they could find some too.

## **ASK** Students

Why do you think people from places like China and Peru came to California to find gold?

## **TELL** Students

People from places like China and Peru came all the way to California to find gold because they heard stories about how much gold was there and thought they could find some too. They wanted to find gold because it was very valuable and could help them buy things they needed or wanted. Even though it was a long and hard journey, the chance to find gold and maybe become rich was a big reason for them to come. When they finally arrived in California, they tried their best to find gold, hoping it would change their lives for the better. Then, President James K. Polk talked about gold in a speech in December 1848. **[Reference James Polk Image]** He said that there was so much gold in California that it was hard to believe!

## **ASK** Students

Why do you think people traveled so far to look for gold?

## **TELL** Students

People traveled all the way to California from places like China and Peru because they heard exciting stories about a lot of gold being there. They thought that if they could find gold, they could become rich and buy things they needed or wanted, like food, clothes, or even a new house. The journey was very long and hard, but the chance to find gold and improve their lives was worth it to them. They hoped that finding gold would help them and their families have a better future. In the spring of 1849, thousands of people, mostly men, traveled across mountains and oceans to California to try to get rich quickly. These gold seekers were called "49ers."

# Lesson

## **TELL** Students (continued)

They left everything behind and took big risks, hoping to find gold. **[Reference 49ers Image]** "49ers" is the nickname for those who flocked to northern California in 1849 hoping to take advantage of the Gold Rush.

## **ASK** Students

Why did people want to find gold?

## **TELL** Students

People wanted to find gold because they heard it could make them very rich. They imagined using the gold to buy things they needed or wanted, like food, clothes, or even houses. The stories of gold in California made them excited and hopeful, so they traveled long distances, even across mountains and oceans, to try and find this treasure. They were called "49ers" because so many of them came in the year 1849. These adventurers were willing to take big risks and leave everything behind because they believed finding gold could give them a much better life.

## **ASK** Students

Why did the "49ers" go to California to find gold?

## **TELL** Students

The "49ers" went to California to find gold because they heard stories about how much gold was there and thought they could become very rich. They wanted to use the gold to buy things they needed, like food and clothes, or even to buy houses. They were excited and hopeful that finding gold would help them have a much better life. So, they traveled long distances, sometimes over mountains or across oceans, taking big risks and leaving their homes behind, all because they believed that finding gold would change their lives for the better. **[Reference 49ers Traveling Image]** But, panning for gold often wasn't the quick path to wealth many people hoped for. Success mostly depended on luck, despite the hard and exhausting work involved. Life in the mining camps was tough. Miners dealt with poor food, inadequate housing, and unsanitary conditions.



# Lesson

## ASK Students

What challenges did the “49ers” face when they arrived in California to search for gold, and how did these challenges differ from their expectations?

## TELL Students

These challenges were very different from what many of the “49ers” expected. They thought they would find plenty of gold and have a better life, but the reality was hard work with often little reward, tough living conditions, and a lot of risks. As more people arrived in California, mining towns sprang up. **[Reference Mining Town Image]** While a few men did strike it rich by finding gold, many others found their fortune by providing services to the miners. Samuel Brannan, a merchant and newspaper publisher, became California’s first millionaire not from mining gold, but from selling goods to miners. A **merchant** is someone who buys goods and sells them for a profit. Other successful entrepreneurs included Levi Strauss, who became famous for his durable blue jeans; Domingo Ghirardelli, who sold chocolate and coffee; and Leland Stanford, who made a fortune from his grocery business. **[Reference Brannan, Strauss, Ghirardelli, Stanford Images]** These businessmen made their wealth by “mining the miners” — profiting from the needs of those who came looking for gold.

## ASK Students

How did Samuel Brannan become rich without finding gold?

## TELL Students

Samuel Brannan became rich during the Gold Rush not by finding gold himself, but by selling goods to the miners who were looking for gold. He was a merchant, which means he sold things that people needed to buy. Brannan knew that all the miners coming to California would need tools, food, and other supplies, so he set up a store to sell these items. **[Reference Mining Needs Image]** As more and more miners arrived hoping to find gold, they all needed supplies, and Brannan’s business thrived. He made a lot of money because he was selling what the miners needed to try their luck at finding gold. This smart approach to business made him California’s first millionaire.

# Lesson

## ASK Students

What did Samuel Brannan sell to the miners to become rich?

## TELL Students

Samuel Brannan became rich during the Gold Rush by selling necessary items like tools, food, and other supplies to the miners who came to California hoping to find gold. He set up a store where the miners could buy what they needed to mine for gold. As more miners arrived, they all needed essential supplies, and Brannan's business flourished. His smart business strategy allowed him to profit from the miners' needs, making him California's first millionaire without ever having to find gold himself. Thanks to the Gold Rush, California's population grew very quickly. Between 1849 and 1855, about 300,000 people from all around the world came to California. It was an exciting time, but it was also hard for many people. Let's watch two exciting Learn More with Liberty videos and a Patriot of the Week to learn more!

## WATCH

Learn More With Liberty: The Science of Gold: What Makes Gold So Valuable?

Learn More With Liberty: The Journey West: Trails and Tribulations

Patriot of the Week: James Marshall





# Gold Rush Expedition

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## Objective

To provide second graders with a hands-on, educational experience that simulates the journey and challenges of the “49ers” during the Gold Rush. This activity combines elements of history, geography, and decision-making skills.

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## Materials Needed

- A large map of the United States with a route marked from the East Coast to California
- Station signs (labeling different geographical locations such as the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Sierra Nevada)
- Activity cards with challenges and choices
- Play gold nuggets
- Basic props to represent supplies (like food, tools, and clothing)
- Bags or small backpacks for each group to hold their supplies
- Role cards (miner, navigator, trader, etc.)

## Setup

- Arrange the classroom or playground into different stations representing key locations along the route to California. Each station has specific challenges or activities related to the Gold Rush.
- Prepare activity cards that pose scenarios and choices, such as losing supplies, finding a shortcut, or encountering a native tribe.

## Introduction and Role Assignment

- Briefly explain the objective of the Gold Rush and the journey many undertook to reach California. Assign students to small groups and distribute role cards, giving each student a specific responsibility (e.g., navigator keeps track of the route, miner decides when to search for gold).

## Starting the Expedition

- Each group starts with a certain number of gold nuggets and supplies. Groups make decisions on how to use their resources at each station to advance on the map.



# Gold Rush Expedition

## Moving Between Stations

- As groups travel from one station to another, they draw activity cards that can either help or hinder their progress based on the choices they make (e.g., spend supplies to take a faster but more perilous route).

## Interactive Challenges

- At each geographical station, groups face a challenge related to that area:
  - Great Plains: Decide how much food to consume or trade.
  - Rocky Mountains: Solve a puzzle to find a path through the mountains.
  - Sierra Nevada: Participate in a quick panning activity to find gold.

## Ending the Journey

- Groups reach California and count their remaining gold and supplies. They share what strategies worked best and what they learned about the Gold Rush.

## Reflection

- Discuss the different outcomes of each group. Talk about how historical “49ers” might have faced similar decisions and outcomes. Encourage students to think about how teamwork and planning influenced their journey.

## Learning Outcomes

- Understand the geographic and physical challenges of traveling west during the Gold Rush.
- Develop teamwork and problem-solving skills by making decisions under various scenarios.
- Learn about the economic and social aspects of the Gold Rush through role-play and active participation.

# Gold Rush Adventure Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Color the Scene!

Color the picture of miners panning for gold in a river.



# Gold Rush Adventure Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

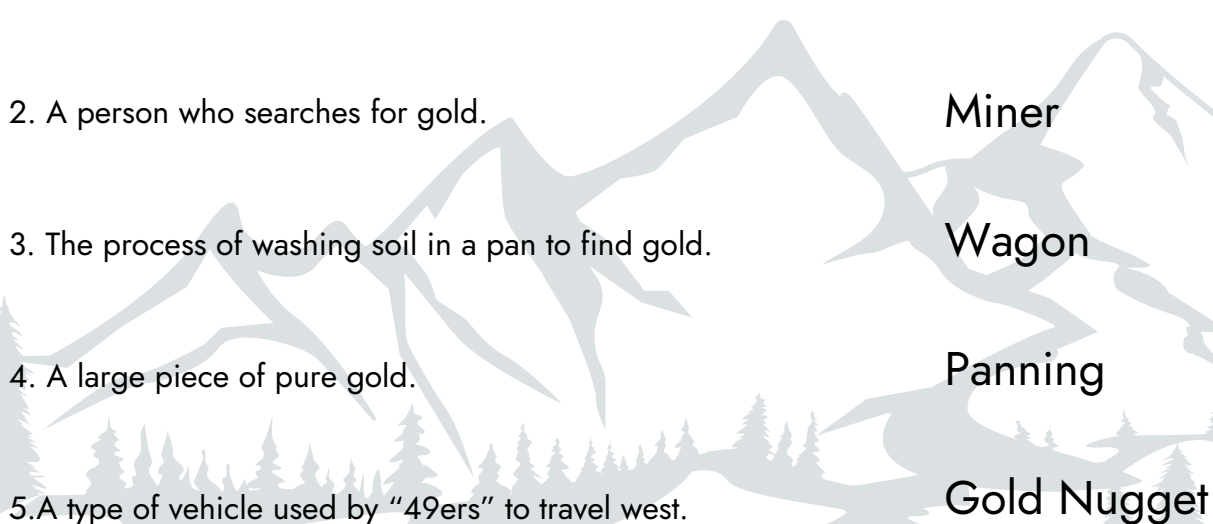
## True or False?

Read the statements below and circle "True" if the statement is correct, or "False" if it is incorrect.

1. Gold was discovered in California in 1848. True or False
2. All miners became rich during the Gold Rush. True or False
3. Miners used only their hands to find gold. True or False
4. The journey to California was easy for most miners. True or False

## Matching Game

Match the following terms related to the Gold Rush with their correct definitions by drawing lines between them.

- 
1. A tool used to dig for gold. Sawmill
  2. A person who searches for gold. Miner
  3. The process of washing soil in a pan to find gold. Wagon
  4. A large piece of pure gold. Panning
  5. A type of vehicle used by "49ers" to travel west. Gold Nugget



# Gold Rush Adventure Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Fill in the Blanks

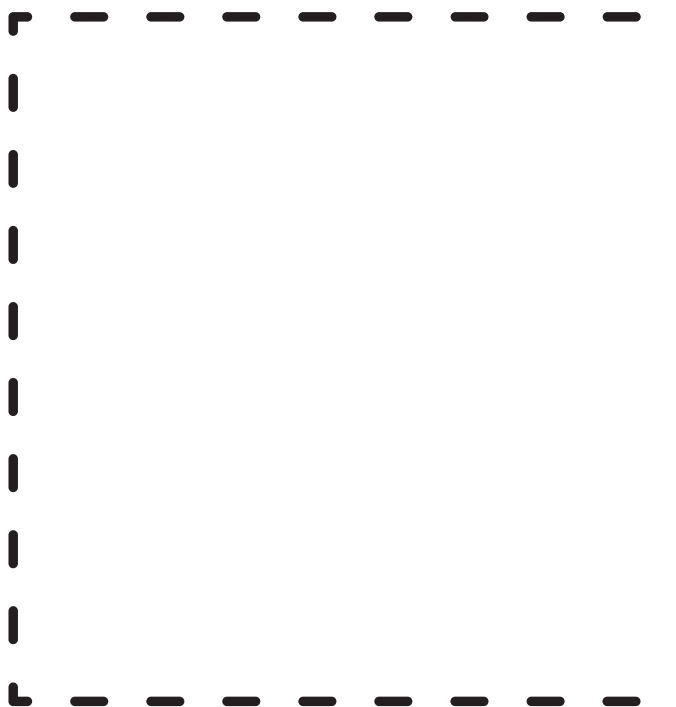
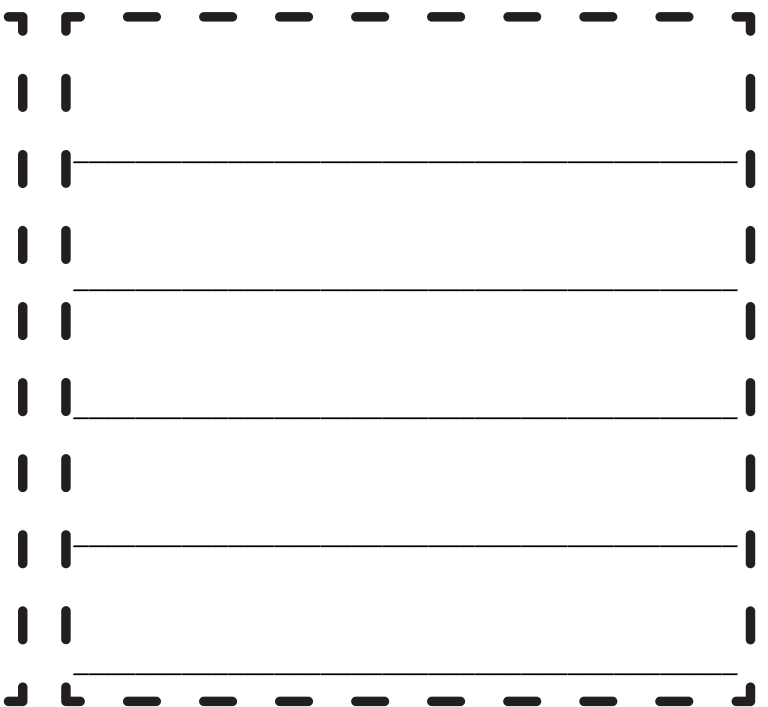
Fill in the blanks with words from the word bank to complete the sentences about the Gold Rush.

travel	California	gold	supplies	risks
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- Many people moved to \_\_\_\_\_ to search for \_\_\_\_\_.
- Miners had to \_\_\_\_\_ long distances and take many \_\_\_\_\_.
- They needed to bring enough \_\_\_\_\_ to survive the journey.

## Creative Corner: Draw and Write

Draw a picture of what you think a mining camp looked like during the Gold Rush. Below your drawing, write one sentence about daily life in the camp.

	
	_____
	_____
	_____
	_____
	_____

# Gold Rush Adventure Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Short Answer

What would you bring with you if you were going on a long journey during the Gold Rush? List three items and explain why you would choose them.

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# Resources

- <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>
- <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/discovery-of-gold/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=1099](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1099)
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/annual-message-to-congress-5/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
- <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/docs/CirGuides/Ridge-Crime-Gold-Rush.pdf>
- <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/california-gold-rush/sources/1912>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-gilded-age/american-west/a/the-gold-rush>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/gold-rush-of-1849>
- <https://www.library.ca.gov/california-history/gold-rush/legacy/>

# Images

**John Sutter**



Credit: Wikipedia.

**Sawmill**



Credit: Canva Pro.

# Images

**Waterwheel**



Credit: Canva Pro.

**Sam Brannan**



Credit: Canva Pro.



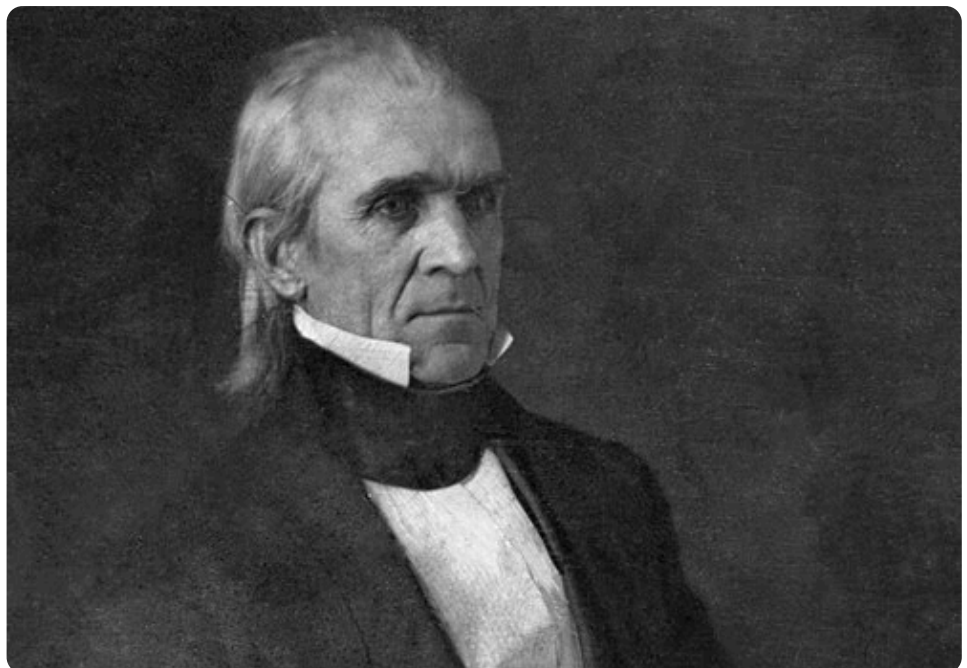
# Images

## Gold Rush



Credit: Canva Pro.

## James Polk



Credit: Wikipedia.



# Images

**49ers**



Credit: Canva Pro.

**49ers Traveling**



Credit: Canva Pro

# Images

## Mining Town



Credit: Canva Pro

## Leland Stanford



Credit: U.S. Senate Historical Office

# Images

**Levi Strauss**



Credit: Levi Strauss & Co.

**Domingo  
Ghirardelli**



Credit: National Portrait Gallery



# Images

## Merchants



Credit: Canva Pro.

